

Children's Evaluations of Helpful and Unhelpful Individuals

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Introduction

Infants and toddlers prefer helpful over harmful people (Hamlin, 2015). With age, children's evaluations become more nuanced and they consider severity of need and their relationship to the person in need (Miller, Bersoff, & Harwood, 1990). These variations raise questions about how children's views of helpful and unhelpful interactions change throughout development.

Prior research has examined children's evaluations of helpers and non-helpers compared to neutral characters (Beier et al., in prep). In this study, children did not evaluate helpers positively or non-helpers negatively until 5 years. The current study extends and replicates these findings by examining 3- to 5-year-olds' evaluations of helpful characters and events.

Study 1:

- Do children evaluate helpful actors positively?
- Do young children judge helpful action as more acceptable than unhelpful inaction?

Study 2:

- Do children evaluate nonhelpful actors negatively?
- Do young children judge helpful action as more acceptable than unhelpful inaction?

Methods

Video Sequence

Study 1: 95 3- to 5-year-olds

Study 2: 61 3- to 5-year-olds (of planned 96)

Character Evaluation Videos

Neutral Video: The neutral character reads her book while a girl hangs a poster on the wall.

Help Video (Study 1): The helper hands tape to a girl who needs it to hang a poster.

No Help Video (Study 2): The non-helper does not hand tape to a girl who needs it to hang a poster.

Acceptability Judgment Videos

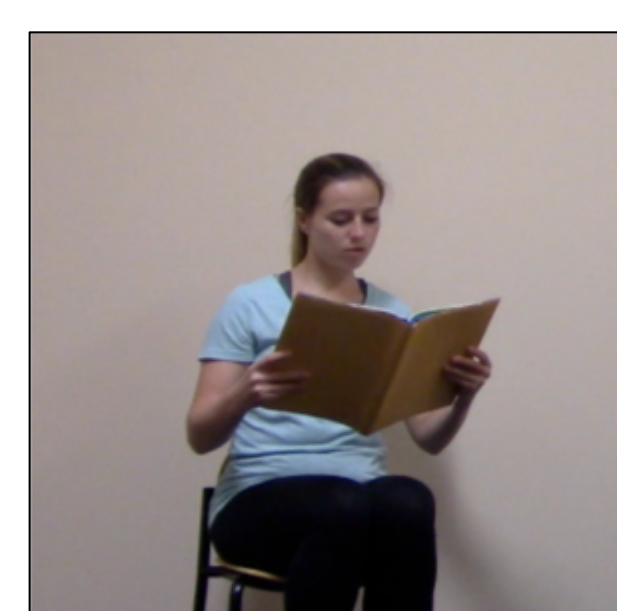
Help Video: A girl drops a box over a barrier. The helper picks up the box and hands it to the girl.

No Help Video: A girl drops a box over a barrier. The non-helper does not pick up the box for the girl.

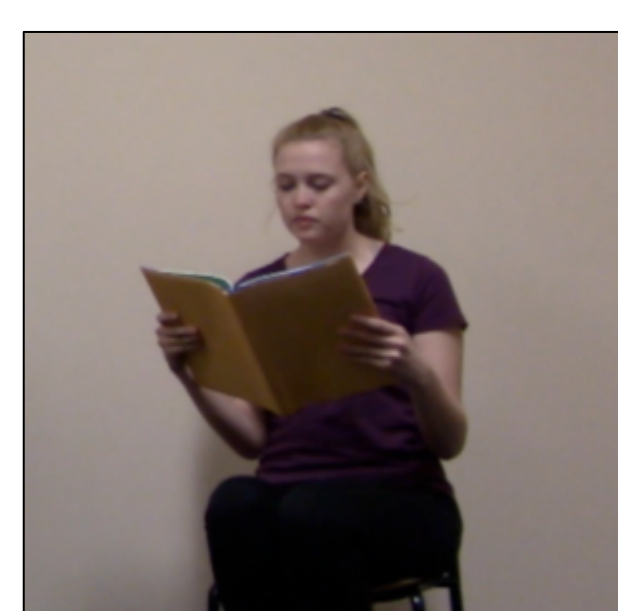
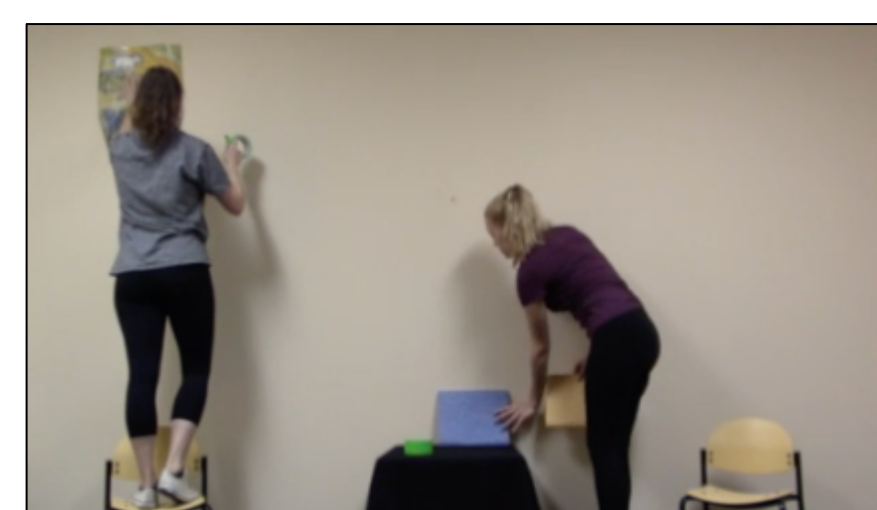
(order of videos and side of actors are counterbalanced)

Study 1

Helper

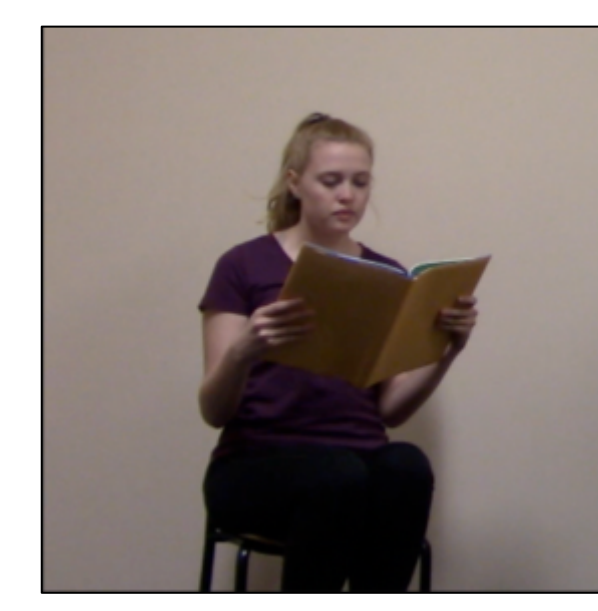
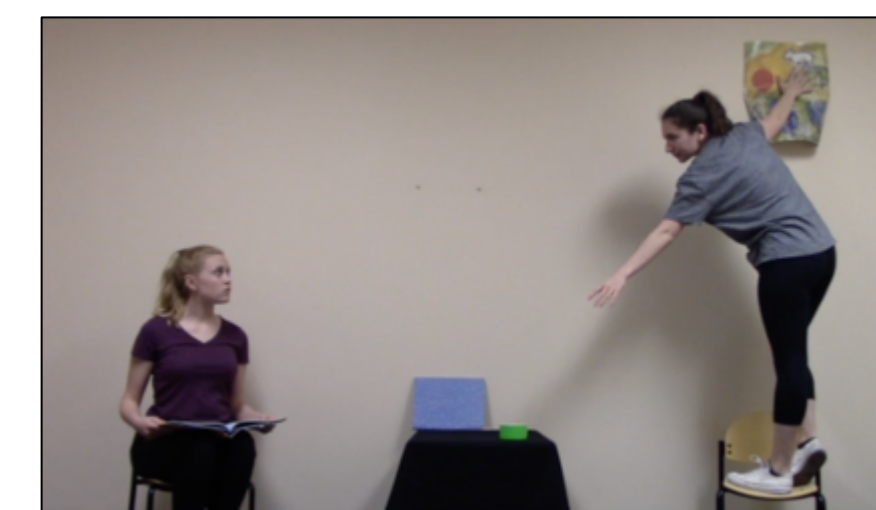


Neutral

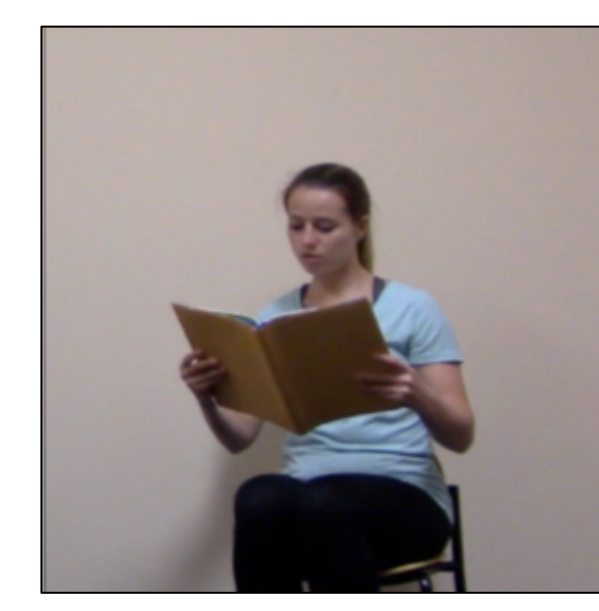
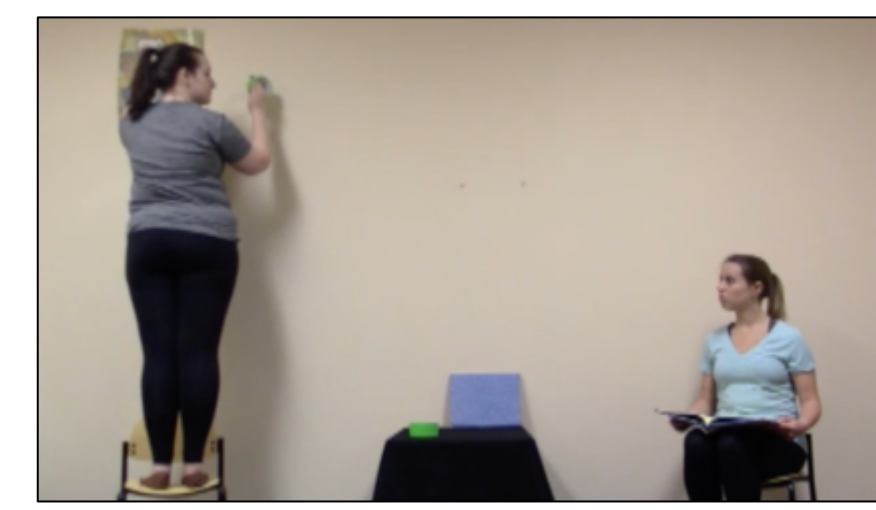


Study 2

Non-Helper



Neutral



Which girl is nicer/meaner?

Remember, she helped/did not help the other girl. Do you think that was all right or not all right?

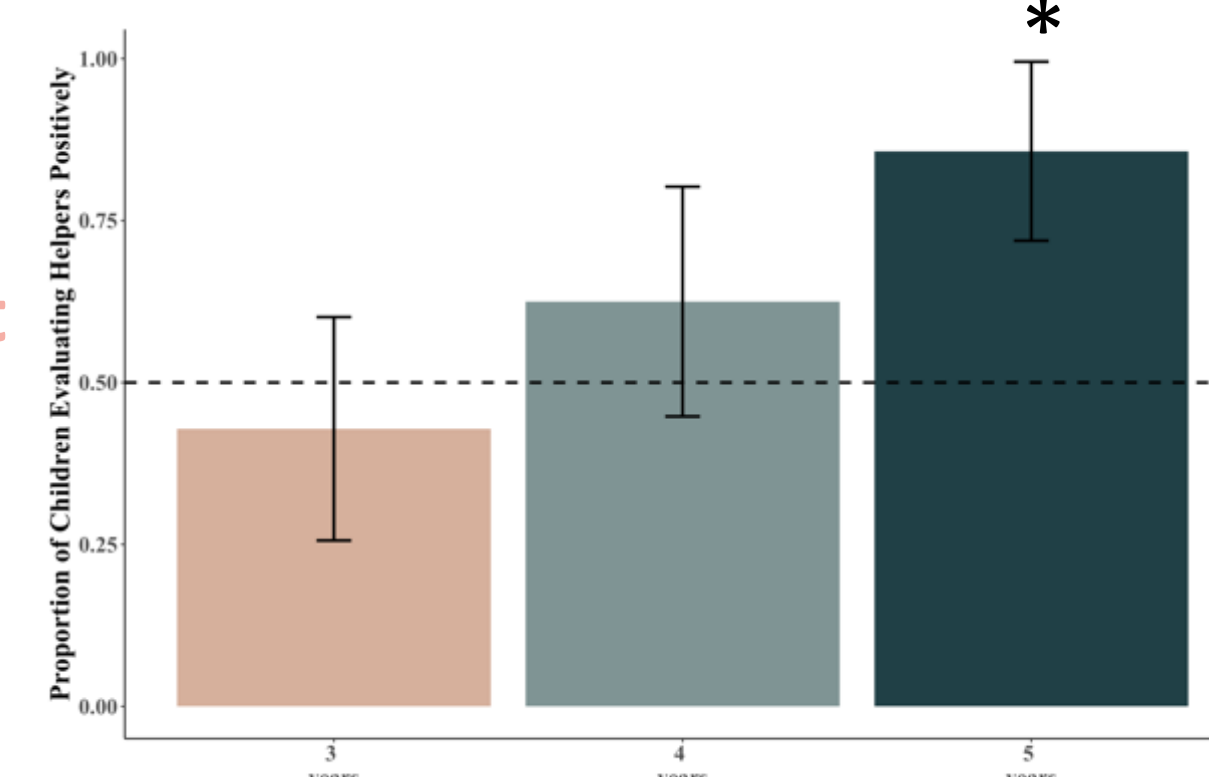


Remember, she helped/did not help the other girl. Do you think that was all right or not all right?

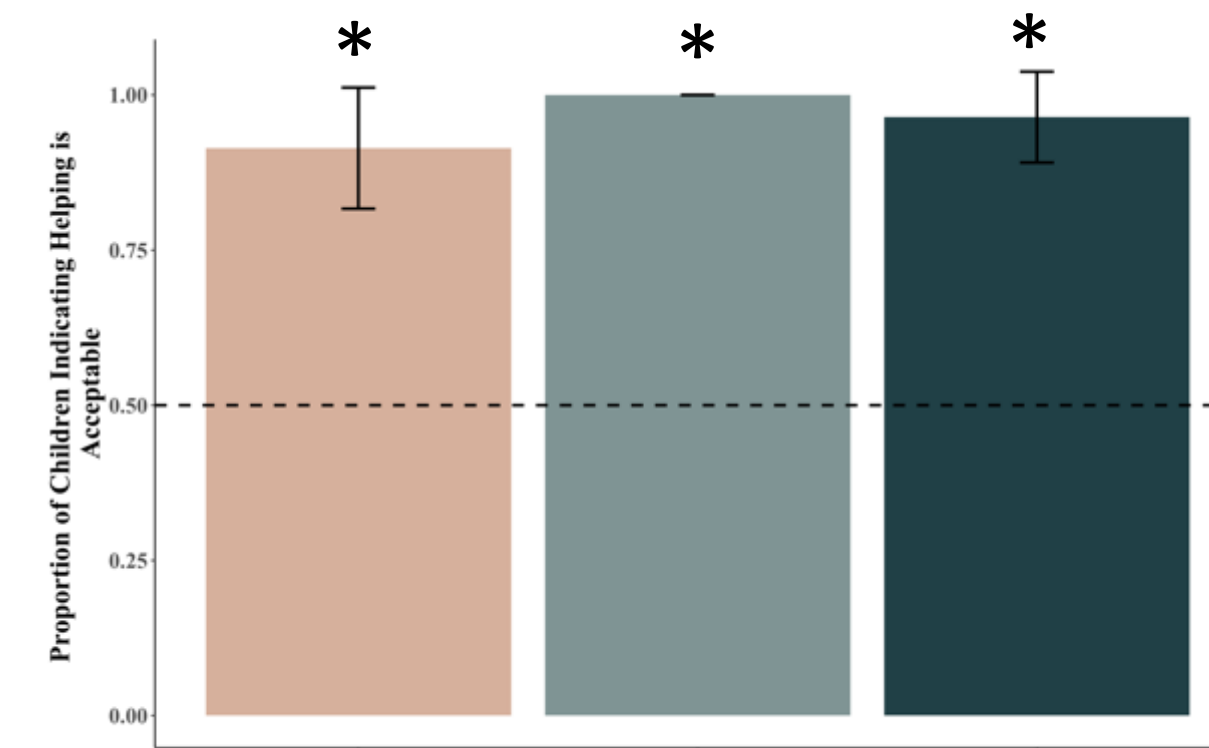
Additional questions (not yet analyzed):
Why? Should she get into trouble?
How much trouble?

Study 1

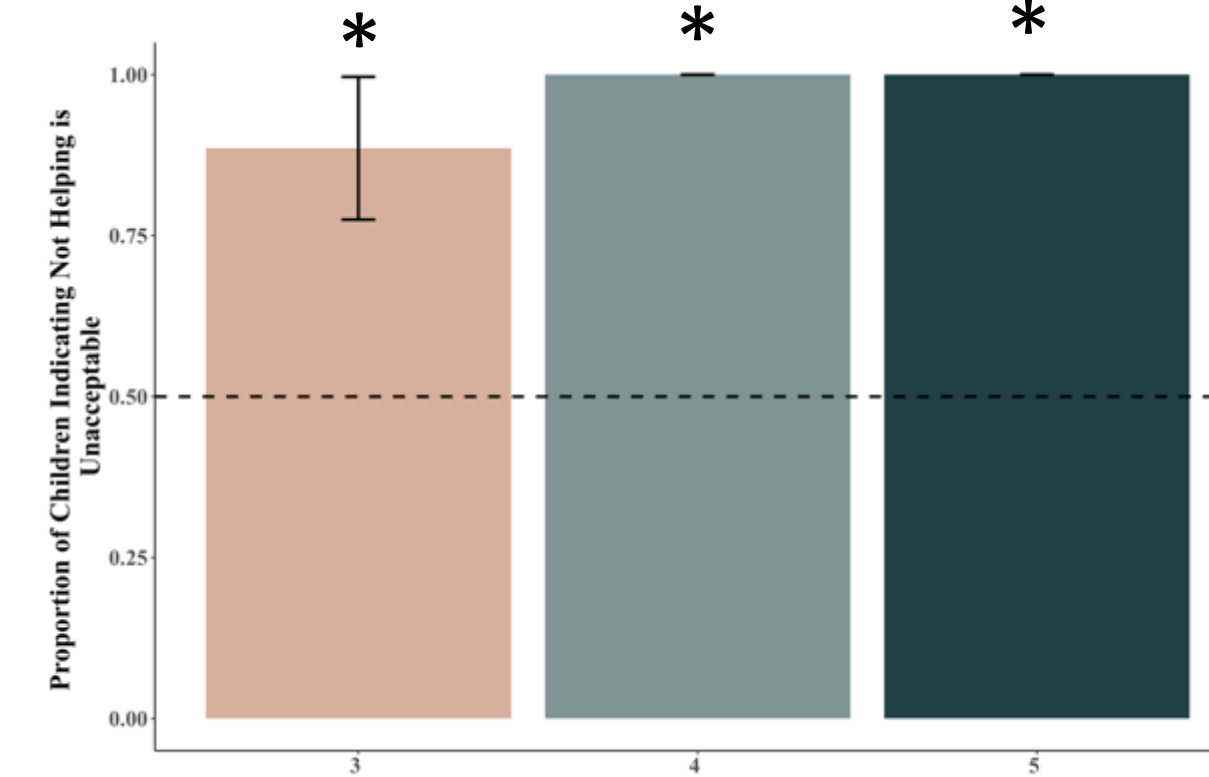
Do children evaluate helpers positively?
3- & 4-year-olds do not evaluate helpers more positively, but 5-year-olds do.



Do children view helping as acceptable?
Yes!

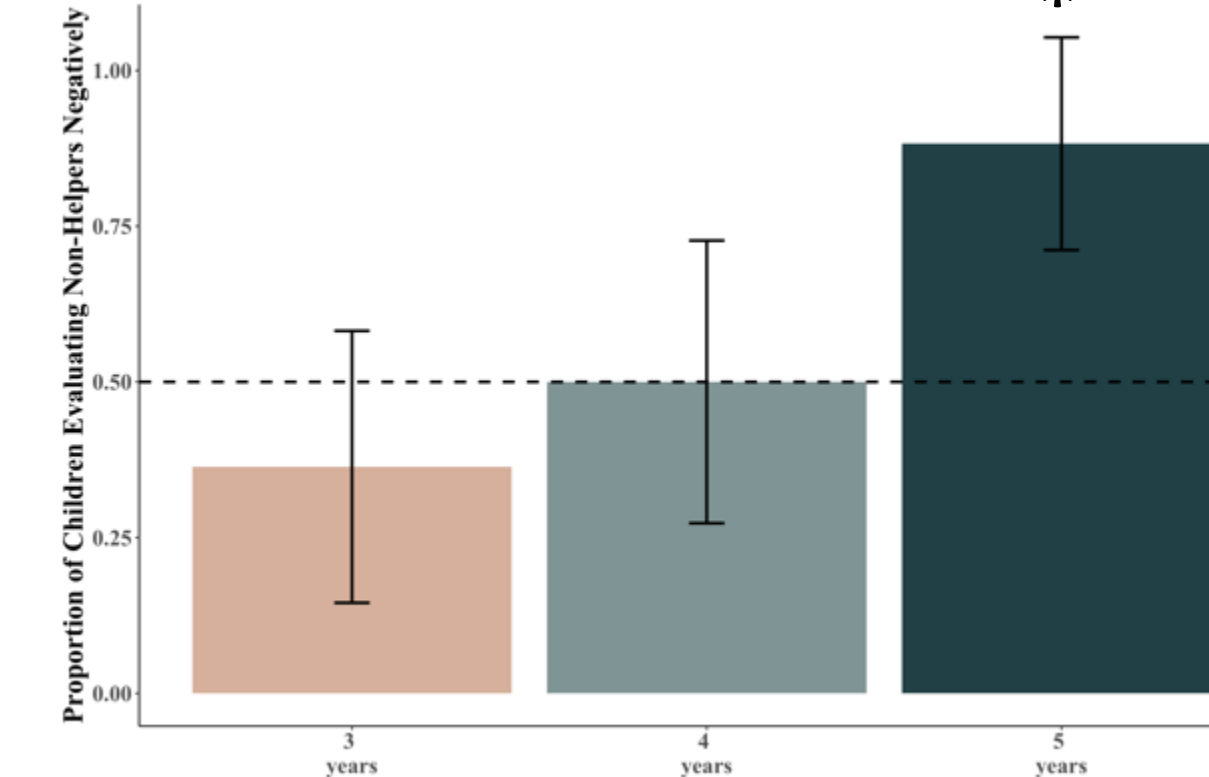


Do children view not helping as unacceptable?
Yes!

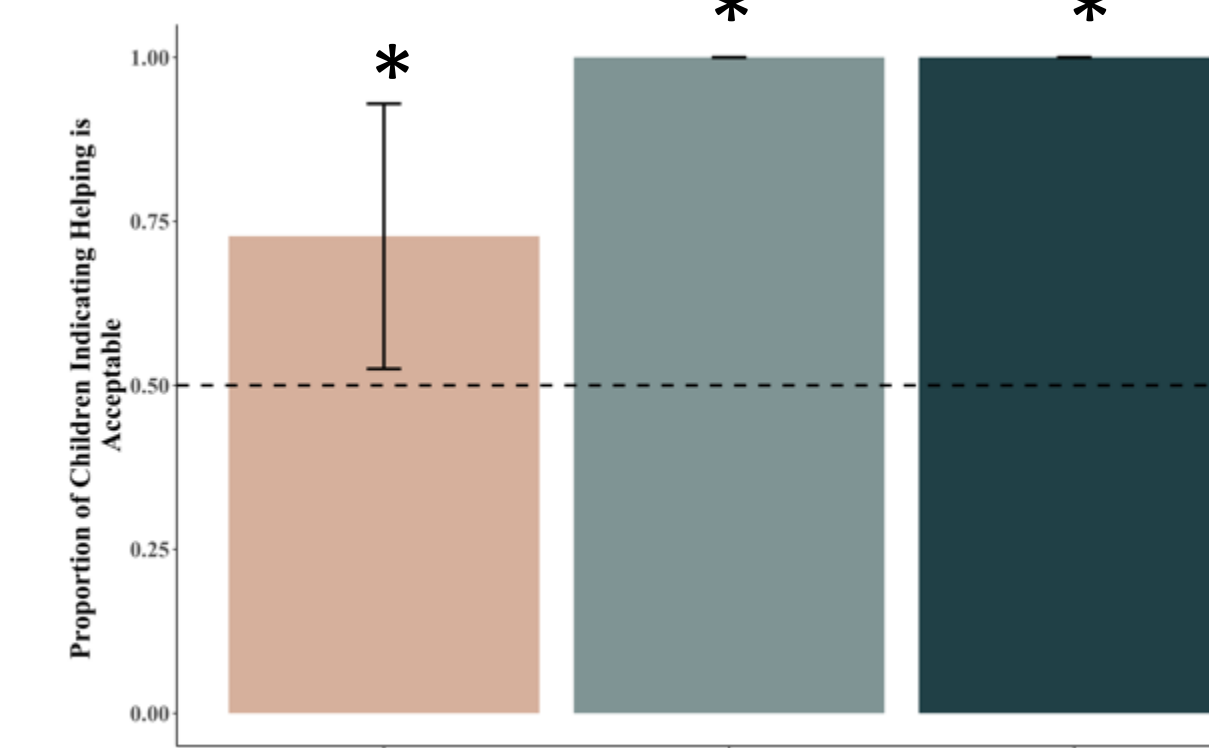


Study 2

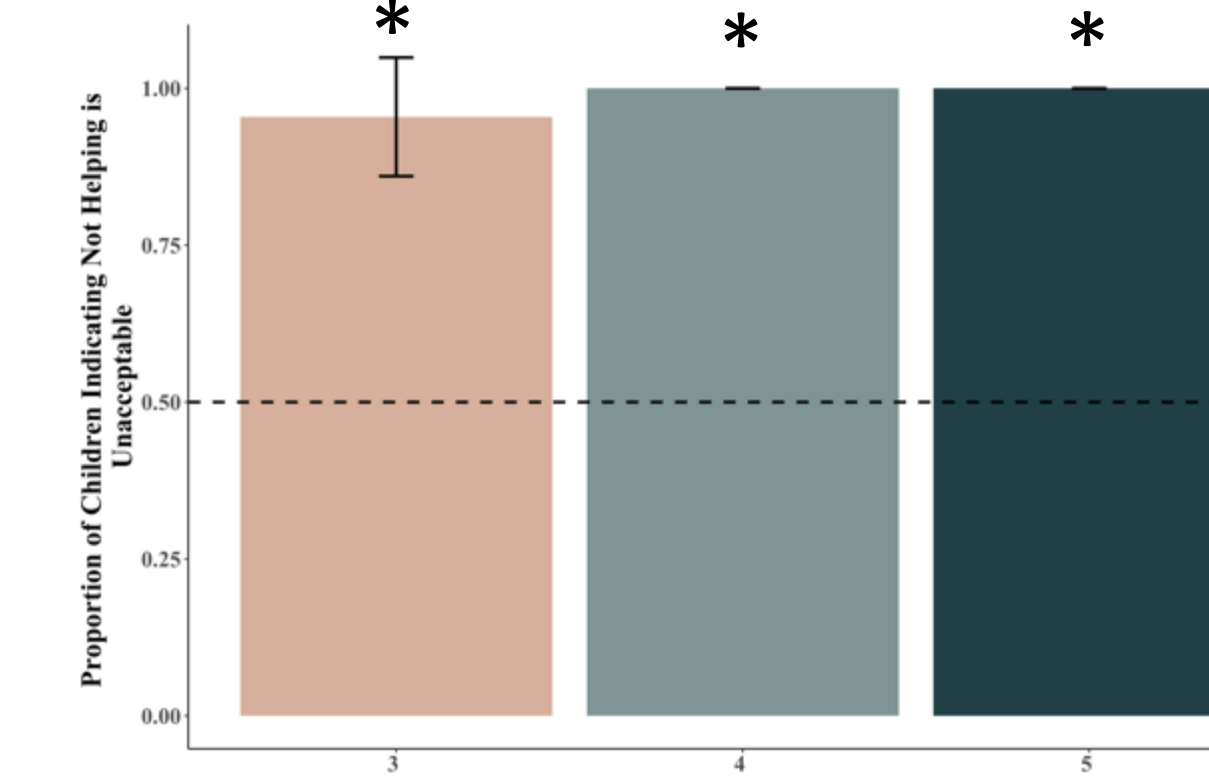
Do children evaluate non-helpers negatively?
3- & 4-year-olds do not evaluate non-helpers negatively, but 5-year-olds do.



Do children view helping as acceptable?
Yes!



Do children view not helping as unacceptable?
Yes!



Conclusions

Study 1: Overall, children viewed the helper more positively than the neutral character. However, 3- and 4-year-olds as a group did not view the helper more positively, indicating evaluations may not occur consistently until 5 years of age. Children do not answer the nicer/meaner questions differently.

Study 2: Overall, children do not view the neutral character more positively. However, 5-year-olds as a group do view the neutral character more positively. Children do not answer the nicer/meaner questions differently.

Study 1 & 2: Children view helpful actions as more acceptable than unhelpful inaction.

- 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds view helpful action as acceptable and unhelpful inaction as unacceptable in both Study 1 and Study 2.

Data collection for study 2 is on-going, so overall results are preliminary.

Future Directions

While children evaluate simple helping behaviors as acceptable, contextual factors may influence these evaluations, including the relationship between the two actors, the situational context, and the severity of the helping action may affect a child's evaluation. Future work could examine the extent to which these factors influence children's evaluations.

Helping obligations also differ across cultures. To explore how cultural differences influence children's evaluations of helping, we have filmed stimuli for a cross-cultural study to be run in India and the U.S that examines the influence of culture, social hierarchies, and type of need.

References

- Hamlin, J.K. (2015). The infantile origins of our moral brains. In J. Decety & T. Wheatley (Eds.), *The moral brain: A multidisciplinary perspective*. (pp. 105-122). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Miller, J.G., Bersoff, D.M., & Harwood, R.L. (1990). Perceptions of social responsibilities in India and in the United States: Moral Imperatives or Personal Decisions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(1), 33-47. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.1.33>